

## Breaking the Headscarf Ban in Secular Turkey: An Alternative Educational Establishment in Istanbul

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### Abstract

This paper examines the programme at Akademistanbul, an alternative establishment of higher learning in Istanbul, and the particular niche it caters for in the Turkish educational system. Its students are all female, and they all wear the headscarf. As such, Akademistanbul is one of the institutions of higher learning that has been welcoming to hijabi women even in a period of headscarf ban in universities. Akademistanbul offers programmes in Islamic studies, Arabic and Psychology and its trajectory reveals the interesting shift in what routes girls who have been barred from going to secular universities may follow for higher learning. My paper will look at the curriculum of the academy and include interviews with the students and staff to see where they place it in the constellation of the alternative institutions of higher learning in Turkey, particularly in relation to theology faculties at ‘secular’ universities.

**Keywords:** Turkey, secularism, alternative education, hijab ban, psychology

## Breaking the Headscarf Ban in Secular Turkey: An Alternative Educational Establishment in Istanbul

When we discuss the aims of Islamic education in different social environments, such as in majority and minority Islamic countries, we deal with different dynamics at work. My paper is about a new kind of educational establishment in Turkey- a country that does not fit easily into the category of majority Muslim country, being as it is a staunchly secular state. With the establishment of the republican regime, Turkey became a secular state in the 1920's, and almost all aspects of religious education was frowned upon and in many cases banned, particularly in the first decades of the new regime. Since then, the country has gone through periods of more and less liberal regulations concerning education, giving sometimes more, sometimes less space to religious education, reflecting the epistemological leanings of the ruling party in the country. Changes notwithstanding, an underlying distrust of Islamic education has been a constant in the secular elites and opinion makers in Turkey. The paper looks at how in contemporary Turkey, due to the continuous exclusionary regulations of secular establishments, Islamic education made a comeback in new forms in the 00's.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that when the new republic of Turkey was established in 1923, no one would have foreseen where the secularist ideas of the founders of the Republic would take the country. Different reasons have been given on different occasions for the various changes that were instigated in public life such as the changing of the alphabet from Arabic to Latin, changing of the week's holiday from Friday to Saturday and Sunday and abolishing dervish lodges. Sometimes the

goal was articulated as a need to 'secularize' the country, and sometimes as an outright need to 'westernize' - and more often than not the two were conflated. This conflation of goals is expressed in earnest in the reasons given for the Hat Revolution of 1925: "We are doing this so that we may have no difference from the Europeans." (Ertunç, 2010, p. 157)<sup>1</sup> said one reformer when the law was being discussed. Secularism, as a pillar of the republic, was instated in 1926, and the Hat Law, which has been quoted as the basis of the headscarf ban in public offices, was introduced even before secularism itself.

Secularism, for the founders of the republic, meant not so much a separation of religious establishment from the state, but a tool that enabled the new elite to sever ties with the old regime which had, according to their reasoning, stagnated due to its blind attachment to Muslim religious law. Anything to do with the *ancien regime* was held suspect, those who wanted to continue in the old ways were paraded in the press as nothing less than traitors to the country. In 1928, fifty-seven men, in fact, were hanged, and hundreds imprisoned for insisting to wear the turban after the Hat Law was passed. (Aktaş, 1989) This is one of the ways in which the Turkish public was alienated from more classical methods of education, associating the old schools and the teacher's turban with disloyalty to one's country and the risk of being a pariah. The outward signs of religiosity became suspect and unwanted in the new Turkey, and an amorphous idea of a 'religious education' was found culpable for what was perceived to be the backwardness of the country. 'The religious man' or the 'imam' was used as the scare figure in many educational texts, typically pitted against the village school teacher who would, more often than not, convince the villagers that science had more authority than religion in solving their problems.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1930's the Ottoman education system was completely overhauled and the teaching of religion itself was secularized in state schools and universities in a manner that would champion nationalism and serve the state's new citizen constituting project. The old institutions of learning were systematically closed, their graduates ridiculed and maligned, and accused as the cause of the country's 'backwardness'.<sup>3</sup> In a bid to become European the students would now be exclusively exposed to European scholars. The new state, according to its founders, had no use for the obscure texts written by Islamic scholars of centuries ago, taught in old, badly equipped schools. The change in curricula was towards an emphasis on a positivist approach to natural and social sciences and there was no recognition that confessional and secular methods of teaching could have the same learning objectives. Mustafa

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<sup>1</sup> The need to conform to European norms was being aired more and more openly in the Turkish parliament in the 1920's, and another reformer in favour of the hat law said: 'The Turkish nation that is walking the path for taking on and adopting contemporary civilization is obliged, not to adapt contemporary civilization to its own, but itself adapt to it' (p. 158). The rhetoric for changing Turkish dress amounted to a public-relations effort directed at convincing 'developed nations' and Turks themselves that they belonged in Europe.

<sup>2</sup> One archetypal story of this kind was Halide Edip Adivar's novel *Vurun Kahpeye* (1926). The story involved a young, female, idealist Istanbulian school teacher who is posted to a town in Anatolia where she supports the war of independence and where an imam turns the village against her. The novel was adapted into film three times in, 1949, 1964, 1973 and served as the blueprint for villanization of Muslim clergy as a class that has resisted and still resists the republic itself and its ideals.

<sup>3</sup> The republican founding fathers themselves were Ottomans who had had a more or less European education, and were alienated from various aspects of their own culture. They came to see if not Islam itself - there were many secularists among them who claimed they were better Muslims than those who went to the mosque five times a day, that they needed no such outward signs and declarations of their pure and sincere faith- the way Islam was practiced in Turkey as an obstacle to the country's progress. One gesture that points to the aspiration for the creation of a new national religion that would make fewer demands on the citizen's time was that of changing the language of prayer to Turkish. For a lengthier discussion of the issue see Macpherson (2011).

Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic himself, thought the education system needed rapid and extensive reform in that direction:

I believe that the methods of education and training that have been practiced until now are the most important causes of our nation having been left backward. That is why when I speak of a national education programme, I mean a culture that is in keeping with our national character and national history, unsullied by the empty beliefs of the old period, or by other influences that may have come from the East or the West and that have nothing to do with our own nature. The development of our own national genius will be made possible only through such a culture. (Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1997) <sup>4</sup>

Note here that Atatürk does not blame 'Islamic education', but 'the empty beliefs of the old period', however the implicit meaning was clear. He was also dealing an even hand to both 'East' (read Islam) and 'West' calling for a 'national(istic)' mode of education that would distance the new citizen from either influence. This seeming cautionary attitude towards the west is naturally belied by Atatürk's other speeches where he lauds the progressive methods of the 'West'. Thus, a secular methodology in teaching was adopted that meant a disregard of Islamic approaches and contributions to the social and natural sciences.

With these principles in mind the republic took national education to corners of the country that had been neglected, and in the same stroke also alienated whole swathes of the country by introducing co-educational classrooms and cleansing the curriculum from references to the Quran and the Hadith. In the 1960's a solution to the alienation of the more observant<sup>5</sup> sections of society was found in the Imam Hatip high schools that were segregated and provided Quran and Hadith instruction alongside the conventional secular natural and human sciences. The courses on the Quran and Hadith crucially 'excused' the use of headscarf in school as one should be in proper religious attire when dealing with sacred texts. There was a secular reaction both to the Imam Hatip schools and to the number of hijabi women who graduated and won places at university. The reaction materialized in a hijab ban in the 1980's which has been lifted for university students in 2012, but continues to this day for regular high school and university students and teachers.<sup>6</sup>

The secular rhetoric against both the hijab and the Imam Hatips continued at full speed in the 00's. As Nazife Şişman (2009) points out, many secularists think it against the 'free will' that children should be given a religious education at an early age:

According to [the secularist] the reason that lay behind the rise of women who wanted to be present as equals in public space was these women being subjected to religious education. If in the Koranic Schools, the Imam Hatips and even in the family there were no religious

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<sup>4</sup> The founder of the republic also had this to say about the change needed to be carried out in the education system: "We cannot close our eyes and imagine that we are living alone. We cannot encircle our homeland and close off ties with the outside world. We as a risen, progressed and contemporary nation will, on the contrary live even above the level of current civilization. This can happen only with knowledge and science. We will take knowledge and science wherever it may be and put it in the head of every single individual of the nation. There are no rules and restraints when it comes to knowledge and science." This impassioned declaration ends with a warning of sorts- that certain knowledge will be 'put into the heads' of the people whether they like it or not. Another interesting aspect of the rhetoric is this awareness of the outside world- which for Turkey has always meant Europe, watching. And as Orhan Pamuk (2005) in his *Istanbul: Memories of the City* says the following about the constant surveillance that republican elites felt they were under: "So whenever I sense the absence of Western eyes, I become my own Westerner." (p. 261)

<sup>5</sup> By 'observant' I mean adherence to prayer five times a day and the Ramadan fast, staying away from alcohol and pork, and a modest dress code for both men and women. This does not necessarily mean a headscarf for women.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed history of the ban see Aktaş (2006), Benli (2005), Cindoglu, D., and Zencirci, G. (2008).

education, then we would not have the problem of the headscarf ban in public space today.’  
(p. 155)

As this quote suggests secular education’ in Turkey meant not one that was neutral towards religion, but one that emphasized the dangers of religion, such as ‘brainwashing’ students into rejecting scientific theories, or instilling in them regressive social attitudes.

After alternating periods of more and less relaxed regulations concerning the headscarf, in the period 2001-2003 the marginalization and secularization of religious practices in state schools went so far as banning the wearing of the hijab at the faculty of Islamic Sciences at state universities.<sup>7</sup> This proved to be a decisive moment, and when marginalization reached such proportions, various alternative educational establishments were set up to cater for the intellectual endeavours of practicing Muslims. These have taken many shapes; such as Quranic schools that are organized around mosques and institutes that attempt to offer a more Islamic take on the humanities. By the latter I mean very elementary things: that the teacher/professor is able to quote from the Quran and Hadith without having to apologize, and he/she is able to make references to scholarship from Islamic countries. I will start by describing the ‘alternative’ academic field in which Akademistanbul is situated and then focus on the services that Akademistanbul provides. I will then investigate the reasons why students choose this establishment, through an analysis of the institution’s programmes and interviews made with students.

The precursor of these ‘alternative’ educational establishments that cater for the higher educational needs of observant Muslims who wanted to see the Islamic heritage reflected in the curriculum is the Bilim Sanat Foundation, set up in Istanbul in 1986, as an academic institution that provides university-level lectures for free. The institute did not have classes at Friday prayer time, and had wudu and salah facilities within the building, an unthinkable act of regression for many secular universities in the 80’s. Bilim Sanat’s staff was drawn from various scholars ranging from those whose work did not regard Ottoman and Islamic scholars with enough suspicion and/or disdain and dared make use of them in their syllabi, and therefore were excluded and in some instances expelled from state institutions, to those who *did* have positions in secular state universities and yet wanted to explore the more Islam-related aspects of their fields. For the latter, Bilim Sanat Foundation provided an outlet through which they could combine Islamic scholarship with secular social sciences, such as lectures in modern Islamic political thought. One of the lecturers who taught humanities there along these lines in the 90’s was the current Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. Bilim Sanat attracted the observant Muslim intellectual elite that later formed the cadres of the current ruling party in Turkey, the AKP.

The students that attended and still attend the lectures at Bilim Sanat come from a variety of mostly observant Muslim backgrounds: from observant university students who want to enhance their understanding of social sciences with references to Islamic scholarship, to female students who were not able to go to university

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<sup>7</sup> When the pro-hijab Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power in 2002, the hijab ban had reached its peak. The staunchly secular military’s power over Turkish politics was so great that AKP did not feel confident enough to change the status quo when it came to the hijab ban. Only after two more victories in the ballot box did AKP get the confidence to appease the military and encouraged universities to lift the ban. However, because the regulatory provisions of the Education Ministry or the later mandates and regulations did not provide a centralized enforcement mechanism and because the enforcement of the ban was left up to the individual university administrators, the implementation and enforcement of the law has been inconsistent and arbitrary, across time and space. (Yıldırım, 2010)

because of the headscarf ban. Not founded with this mission, at the height of the headscarf ban in the 90's and the 00's, Bilim Sanat started to cater largely to the hijabi market, although it is a co-educational establishment. Due to demand in this period, other establishments were founded to provide higher education to hijabi women. While Bilim Sanat remains an institution that offers courses without the licence to grant any kind of diploma or degree recognized by the Turkish or international authorities, other 'alternative' institutions that cater to the hijabi market were set up that advertised themselves as 'universities' and offered the promise of a university degree as franchises of international universities such as Alfred and Newport.

Akademistanbul, founded in 2005, differs from the two in that it does not call itself a university, and professes to only facilitate students' extern education with the Islamic University of Europe in Rotterdam.<sup>8</sup> The mission statement of Akademistanbul says that it is founded to "provide the possibility of a university education for young women who have for various reasons not been able to continue with their education",<sup>9</sup> which in the Turkish context means almost exclusively because of the hijab ban. Akademistanbul calls the service it provides 'academic consultancy'<sup>10</sup> and is clear that the certificates it offers for its programmes are not recognized as equivalent to those of higher education establishments in Turkey unless they enrol in the extern programme. Akademistanbul offers classes for the following undergraduate IUE extern programmes: 1) Islamic Sciences 2) Arabic Language 3) Psychology and graduate programmes in: 1) Islamic Sciences 2) Social and Human Sciences. For the Islamic Sciences student there is a preparatory year for learning Arabic. The academy also offers language courses in Arabic and English independent of the extern programme.

As it stands, Akademistanbul is a fully-functioning educational establishment in the old Istanbul district of Fatih, abuzz with activity with students whose dress code is not that different from black academic gowns, muttering phrases in Arabic rather than in Latin, scuttling from one wood panelled classroom to another, with classrooms named after different cities in the Islamic world, from Madina to Damascus, students huddling around notice boards to find out their grades for, say 'Spoken Arabic'.<sup>11</sup> For its extern support courses in the Islamic Sciences and Psychology it uses textbooks used by Turkish state universities, and some of its staff teach or have taught in state universities. In that sense, what is different in Akademistanbul from state universities is largely the kind of discussion that is encouraged in the classroom -which allows for explicit references to Islam's sacred texts, something that is still taboo in state universities.

## **Akademistanbul Programmes:**

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<sup>8</sup> In the 2011-2012 academic Akademistanbul started its support programme for the extern degree for European Polytechnical University in Bulgaria. The extern degrees they provide support for are Psychology, Sociology, International Commerce and Arabic Language and Literature.

<sup>9</sup> The 'About Us' link for Akademistanbul that I accessed in 2010 is no longer available. The site has been updated to include a wider variety of co-operations with international universities. For more information see: [http://www.akdemistanbul.com.tr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=76&Itemid=138](http://www.akdemistanbul.com.tr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76&Itemid=138). The discourse about the hijab ban which informed the founding of the institute is however still touched upon in this promotional video: [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xep2i4\\_akademistanbul-tanitim-filmi\\_school](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xep2i4_akademistanbul-tanitim-filmi_school). Also, it is quite telling that in the extern programme webpage for IUE there's the picture of a hijabi girl, smiling in a somewhat coy manner <http://www.iueurope.com/tr/>

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the support courses it provides for the IUE, the Academy does also provide real education consultancy, providing information about universities abroad and helping with the application process.

<sup>11</sup> In 2012, the Academy moved to its new place again in the old district of Fatih. Now it occupies three floors in a Gaudi-like apartment block. The classrooms have lost their names and now only have numbers.

### Islamic Sciences

Courses that work toward the Islamic Sciences extern programme include Quranic recitation, Arabic grammar, histories and methodologies of Islamic sciences such as Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad) and Fiqh (Islamic Law), courses on the life of the Prophet, history of different madhabs (Schools of Islamic Law), and also courses in the articles of faith: for instance in the first year, there is a course on Tawheed (Unity of God). The second year includes memorization of the Quran. The students are then given Tafseer (Exegesis) and Hadith texts to analyze. In the second year the students are introduced to the intricate arguments of Kalam, or matters of theology. Third year courses include Psychology of Religion and literature, as a nod to the other fields taught at the academy. In fourth year political science is added to these subjects. Below is the three years undergraduate course curriculum for Islamic Sciences, which illustrates the vision of Akademistanbul when it comes to their understanding of what kind of knowledge a student trained in the Islamic Sciences should have access to:<sup>12</sup>

1 <sup>st</sup> Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	1 <sup>st</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
The Glorious Quran I	The Glorious Quran II
Arabic Grammar I	Arabic Grammar II
Spoken Arabic I	Spoken Arabic II
Arabic Text I	Arabic Text II
Hadith Methodology and History I	Hadith Methodology and History II
Tafseer Methodology and History I	Tafseer Methodology and History II
Fiqh Methodology I	Fiqh Methodology II
Introduction to Islamic Law I	Introduction to Islamic Law II
Life of the Prophet I	Life of the Prophet II
Islamic Creed I	Islamic Creed II
Law Ayats	Madhabs According to Creed

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<sup>12</sup> I have chosen Islamic Science to illustrate the workload and Akademistanbul's method of defining/constructing a discipline that would be most relevant to this volume.

2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
The Glorious Quran III	The Glorious Quran IV
Arabic Grammar III	Arabic Grammar IV
Arabic Text III	Arabic Text IV
Spoken Arabic III	Spoken Arabic IV
Tafseer I	Tafseer I
Hadith I	Hadith I
Islamic Law I	Islamic Law I
History of Islam I	History of Islam I
Kalam I	Kalam I
History of Sufism	Islamic Ethics
Research Methods	Comparative History of Religions
	Psychology of Religion

  

3 <sup>rd</sup> Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
The Glorious Quran I	The Glorious Quran I
Arabic Grammar I	Arabic Grammar I
Arabic Rhetoric	Arabic Rhetoric
Arabic Text Translation Methods	Arabic Text Translation Methods
Contemporary Approaches to the Quran	Contemporary Approaches to the Quran
Law Hadith	Law Hadith
Islamic Law III	Islamic Law IV
History of Islam III	Philosophy of Religion
History of Islamic Civilization	History of Islam IV
History of Islamic Philosophy	History of Western Philosophy
Sociology of Religion	Turkish-Islamic Literature
	Thesis

### Psychology

The academy started its psychology department in 2011. ‘Psychology of Religion’ in particular is a theme that is reiterated on Akademistanbul’s webpage, as it is on the website of the Islamic University of Europe (Rotterdam), whose curriculum is followed by Akademistanbul. The only visible difference in the curriculum compared to curricula of Psychology in secular universities is one course taught in one semester, Psychology of Religion, common to Islamic Sciences and Psychology departments in Akademistanbul. This course is taught also in the state Islamic Sciences programmes and as in other courses, Akademistanbul uses their textbook for it.<sup>13</sup> The course starts

<sup>13</sup> The chapter headings of the textbook are: 1) The Science of Psychology of Religion 2) Religion, Religiosity and Its Dimensions 3) The Sources of Religiosity 4) The Effects of Religiosity 5) Factors That Influence

with a rather secular description of religion as a social and moral phenomenon, exploring its sources, the impact of religious rituals on an individual's psychology, etc, but then in class in Akademistanbul it moves on to the descriptions human psychology in the Quran and starts using Quranic terminology. It involves a discussion of *nafs* (self) and how and where it appears in the Quran, along with Quran's descriptions of *fitrah*, or human nature, and what happens when one veers away from this God-given nature.

Akademistanbul offers two external 'faith based' graduate courses in the field of Psychology:<sup>14</sup> 1) Faith-Based Psychology for Counselling<sup>15</sup> 2) Faith-Based Counselling and Guidance, both of which students can follow after they have completed a conventional psychology course. For the first course, the supplementary courses included in this special counselling graduate degree are 1) Basic Islamic Knowledge I and II 2) Methodology and History of Hadith 3) History and Methodology of Fiqh 4) Methodology and History of Tafseer 5) Life of the Prophet 6) Islamic ethics and Sufism 7) civil law in Islam 8) Readings in Hadith 9) readings in Quran and Tafseer 10) History of Madhabs. The rector of the Islamic University of Europe, Ahmet Akgündüz says that the graduates of this programme are in high demand by the authorities in the Netherlands,<sup>16</sup> particularly from hospitals and prisons where such counselling is already present for Christian and Jewish patients and inmates. Akademistanbul, aware of a niche that has opened up in Turkey, markets this programme as faith-based counselling for families: even within practicing sections of Turkish society extended family structures are shrinking and more and more family conflicts are being resolved not within the extended family itself but with the help of professionals.

#### Arabic:

The third programme at Akademistanbul, that of Arabic Language, seems to offer the best job opportunities for students at a time when Turkey's relations with the Arab world are getting more and more crucial. Arabic Language degree is divided into three pathways 1) Media Arabic 2) International Trade Arabic 3) Translation/Interpretation Arabic. Several graduates of the Arabic programme are now working for TRT Arabic, the newly established Turkish State Television channel that broadcasts in Arabic. In 2010 Akademistanbul also hosted the monthly Friends of Jerusalem programme, in which Arabic academics and journalists came to inform the students, in Arabic, about the Palestine issue from different angles. The attendance and engagement of the students with these talks were quite high and provided a platform for them to test their Arabic.

#### An Assessment of the Academy:

When I conducted my interviews in March 2011, before the almost complete easing of the hijab ban for students in 2012, girls had been allowed to enter *some* state

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Religiosity 6) The Development of Religiosity 7) Psychology of Belief 8) Understandings of God 9) Prayer, Worship and Religious Rituals 10) Repentance, Going Back to Religion, Religious Conversion (Hökelekli 2010)

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.iueurope.com/tr/akademik/ibf-psikoloji-bolumu> for general information on the Psychology options and [http://www.iueurope.com/tr/images/stories/iue/iue\\_brosur\\_enson.pdf](http://www.iueurope.com/tr/images/stories/iue/iue_brosur_enson.pdf) for detail information on the courses, hours and credits.

<sup>15</sup> An establishment similar to the Islamic University of Europe, Islamic University of Rotterdam offers a similar course of study and lists the following as its courses: Spiritual Care as a Profession, Spiritual Care in Justice and Health Care Organizations, Ethics of Health Care, Communicative Skills for Spiritual Care Experts, Mediation and Advising, Islamic Counseling. For further information see: <http://www.iur.nl/en/education/academic-programmes/master-islamic-spiritual-care/340-curriculum.html>

<sup>16</sup> For the full interview in Turkish see <http://www.beyazhaberler.com/?p=1873>



universities with the hijab, including faculties other than theology/Islamic sciences. Akademistanbul's students included girls fresh from highschool who wanted to be able to study wearing the hijab,<sup>17</sup> students -as the old mission statement suggested- who were not able to continue their education (in a variety of fields), and women who *were* able to finish their university education wearing the hijab and yet were not able to practice their professions due to discrimination against the hijab and who were now seeking to change fields, and for instance to be private Arabic and/or Islamic and Quranic teachers. I was introduced to the students through one of their lecturers, and after socializing with them on campus for a couple of days I decided to interview three lecturers and five students. The 20-30 minute interviews made on the telephone in 2011 were semi-structured, with three central questions: 1) Why did you choose to study in Akademistanbul? 2) What kind of status do you think Akademistanbul has among other alternative educational establishments? 3) What do you think about its relationship with the Islamic University of Rotterdam?

The interviews made even with the small sample I had reveals the variety of backgrounds, life choices and approaches to Islam. My interviewee Arzu, although she was trained to be a physics teacher at a state university, could not teach because hijabis are not allowed to be 'providers of public service' in Turkey. She told me she had decided to attend Akademistanbul and to study the Islamic Sciences, so that instead of physics, she may be qualified to teach Islamic subjects, either in a Quranic school or as a private teacher, as it is quite common in Turkey for observant families to hire private religion tutors for their children in order to make up for the insufficient teaching of religion in schools. Nezahat, on the other hand, was mostly home-schooled and said that the reason she chose to study at Akademistanbul was that it was the only all-female 'higher education' establishment in Istanbul, and that she wanted to study in an all-female establishment because of her religious beliefs. So students like Arzu who have a 'secular' educational background, i.e. students who have studied natural sciences and who have socialized in a more or less secular, co-educational environment, and students like Nezahat who see studying at Akademistanbul as an extension of their life-choice of leading a sexually segregated social life both choose to study at Akademistanbul. It is quite a social and educational experiment to have these different kinds of students with different backgrounds and expectations in the same classroom, to expose them to the finer points of the Quran, Hadith and Tafseer.

The variety and quality of extracurricular activity and training possibilities is one of the reasons that students are attracted to Akademistanbul, says student Hatice. She herself has made use of these opportunities, and has gone for a summer abroad, programme as a trainee at a magazine in Beirut. Hatice says among the options for hijabi students in Istanbul she chose Akademistanbul because it had good professors for Arabic who had taught at other establishments and whose fame she had heard. But most importantly, she said, she knew that the head of the educational board at Akademistanbul was Ahmet Ağırakça, who used to be a professor of history at Istanbul University and who was forced to resign during a particularly drastic purge of observant Muslim civil servants carried out by the secular state establishment in 1997. Hatice says that she opted for Akademistanbul on the basis of the names of the academics she knew, and that other members of staff did not disappoint either: "When I looked at the kind of education that similar institutions were offering, I could not

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<sup>17</sup> Though the ban had started to ease, the few faculties that allowed hijabi girls meant there was too many applications for too few places, and a good number of qualified hijabis who wanted some kind of higher education still needed to search for alternative establishments.

trust the names I saw on their lists, for I had not heard of any of them. But there were names I recognized on Akademistanbul's brochure" and added "And when I speak of my school and the professors I have, some of these names are known even to students who go to state universities and so Akademistanbul has some cache." (personal communication, February 4, 2011).

As both Hatice and another respondent, Afra, explained, when they decided to seek an alternative to secular state education Akademistanbul seemed to them the most legitimate. My interviews revealed that what attracted the students was the combination of a programme designed by established and recognized scholars, and a certain experimental quality to some of the courses. Interviewee Afra said that the administration was very open to suggestions made by students: "The teachers are very good about assessing the level of the class and adjusting their syllabi. We can even get up petitions for a class and the kind of material taught in it. The students designed one such class for media Arabic for instance, and the administration accepted it" (personal communication, February 4, 2011) The academy encourages the learning of Arabic in every way it can, not just within the academy but in Turkey at large. It has been co-organizing an international Arabic language contest<sup>18</sup> and has been cooperating with Imam Hatip schools to improve their teaching of the language.<sup>19</sup>

While Hatice and Afra are full of praise for the school, there are those who are having second thoughts, according to Ülkü Can who teaches Arabic there. This has ended Akademistanbul's position as the 'only alternative' for hijabi girls: "Some of the girls are really confused and not as focused now. They feel they are missing out on getting a state-recognized diploma and some are considering to take the nationwide exam once again and enter state university Islamic Sciences departments" (personal communication, January 10, 2011). Some have already done that and have moved on to state universities as one of my interviewees told me: "A friend of mine re-set the exam and now is attending her second year at a state university. Her professors are impressed by the Arabic she has learnt at the academy here. And she finds the whole level of education at the state university leaves much to be desired, when compared to Akademistanbul" (personal communication, January 10, 2011)

Seeing that with the easing of the headscarf ban they stand to lose their students, Akademistanbul focus more on their language programmes, and in 2011 they used their expertise of extern Islamic Sciences education to register with the Turkish Education Ministry as a programme that provides academic support<sup>20</sup> for Islamic Sciences students at state universities, and this particularly branch of the enterprise also enrolls male students. On another note, while options are widening for hijabi students, those for hijabi lecturers remain restricted, and indeed Akademistanbul employs a number of them. These are women who have mostly been educated in Arab countries to flee the hijab ban in Turkey and who have brought their Arabic expertise back home. Fluent Arabic is an asset hard to come by in Turkey, even for those who teach the Islamic sciences.

It is worth reiterating that headscarf ban creates a complex tier of dispossession, as since the 80's there have been several periods of relaxation and enforcement. The interviews I have carried out show that although on the face of it, all students wear the hijab, they do not come from the same educational or social

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<sup>18</sup> For more information see: <http://www.arapcayarismalari.org.tr/2013/>

<sup>19</sup> For more information see:

[http://www.akdemistanbul.com.tr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=97&Itemid=141](http://www.akdemistanbul.com.tr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=97&Itemid=141)

<sup>20</sup> These 'support' programmes for the curricula of national education are very common in Turkey, both for highschool and university programmes.

backgrounds, and the reason they have chosen Akademistanbul vary. The imam-hatip graduates, and those who have had to leave their Islamic sciences degrees in state universities because of the headscarf ban come already equipped with some knowledge of Islamic sciences, and others come with background in the natural sciences, either, again, because they were not able to finish their degree because of the ban, or having finished it, were discriminated against in the job market because they were hijabis. The strange silver-lining of the headscarf ban has been that some more disciplined students who would have chosen to do other studies were directed to Islamic Science and Arabic Language and brought their analytical skills and enthusiasm to these fields.

While the bulk of the students in 2011 were there because of the headscarf ban although they would have preferred to study something other than the three programmes offered by the academy, some were there because they wanted to study the Islamic Sciences and Arabic, and had found out after comparing with other alternative establishments and even state schools, they found Akademistanbul to have better professors and curriculum. For yet some others, not so much the academic content, but the segregated environment was the reason they chose to study at the academy. Akademistanbul is able to accommodate the student profile and these varying expectations by letting the students have a say in the curriculum, like adding a Media Arabic class on request by Arabic Language undergrads most of whom plan to work in the Arabic language channels such as TRT and Al Jazeera Arabic. It also offers complementary training opportunities by putting students in touch with media outlets in the Arabic in order to bolster their language and media skills. Thus, it has carved a space for itself in Arabic language learning which has been ruefully neglected in state universities, and whose neglect is now being severely felt with the economic and political ties with the Arab world getting stronger in Turkey.

However, even within the observant Muslim community, who are at the receiving end of discrimination when it comes to religious rights, for establishments like Akademistanbul the stigma of not being a ‘state school’ remains. The cache of a ‘state education’ comes from the fact that at state universities students have had to pass a difficult placement test, and that they are well-established institutions that have been supported and whose standards have been checked by the state for decades. Also, for the public at large it is difficult to tell whether a student has chosen an establishment like Akademistanbul because she was not good enough to go to a proper state university or because she wants to encounter no problems because of her dress code- this effects the graduates’ employability. Accordingly, Akademistanbul and similar establishments make a claim on legitimacy through the once or currently state university employed professors they have in their departments. That ‘legitimacy’ is the primary concern is revealed by the exodus of students to state universities after the easing of the hijab ban.<sup>21</sup>

Despite this exodus, Akademistanbul goes on strong as its mix of confessional and secular learning objectives and close relations with higher education establishments abroad continue to attract a certain type of experimenting student. The presence of students who choose Akademistanbul because of their understanding of gender-relations also shows that there will always be a market for single-sex

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<sup>21</sup> I should like to point out here that ‘legitimacy’, when it comes to religious teaching, in both senses of the word, is quite fraught because, although there was no reference to it in the interviews I made, there’s also the view that precisely because it is controlled by the state, the teaching of Islamic subjects cannot be considered disinterested and free, and therefore the knowledge produced there will always bear the interests of the state. In that sense, the idea of ‘state school’ works like a Pharmakon, both ensuring that the studies are well-disciplined and at the same time beholden to the state’s interests.

educational establishments at all levels. Having grown up in Turkey, all the students will have (apart from the home schooled ones) had some experience of secular education. They are thus well placed to compare the two methodologies, and to explore the common learning objectives the two methodologies harbour. Accordingly, Akademistanbul tries to establish its own tradition of higher education by using a double methodology. In a Turkey where religious references in the classroom are still taboo, it offers a higher education programme where Islamic texts are studied not only in their own right, but also as having a bearing on other disciplines such as psychology. The experience of Akademistanbul also shows that the scholastic, insular atmosphere attributed to establishments that teach religion can be refuted, as the academy maintains a very open outlook with the international conferences and events it organizes.

As I have tried to show, Akademistanbul offers skills that are very much in demand both in Turkey and abroad. Although neither itself, nor its students seem to be fully-franchised in a secular Turkey due to their Islamic ethos, Akademistanbul still contributes to the citizen constituting project, a citizen, in this case, that is made aware not only of the secular European but also Islamic scholarship. Thus, it calls into question the presumed secular premise of that very project. The students' relationship with the state is made evident in their concerns with legitimacy and the number of students that decide to go back to state schools when the ban relaxes, and in the way that establishments like Akademistanbul gain prestige and trust through the state-employed teachers they employ. Having persevered through the changing political landscape within its short life as an institution, an ethos of the primacy of learning and scholarship in whichever field its resources allow seems to have seen Akademistanbul through. In that sense in a secular education system establishments like Akademistanbul act as a safety valves that ensure that scholarship in all sections of society continues on even if certain state policies may at times hinder equal access to all.

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#### Appendix I:

IUE programme of Arabic Language degree, Translation/Interpretation pathway:

1st Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	1st Year 2nd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
Arabic Grammar I	Arabic Grammar II
Arabic Conversation I	Arabic Conversation II
Arabic Vocabulary I	Arabic Vocabulary II
Introduction to Language Linguistics I	Introduction to Language Linguistics II
English I	English II
Arab Literature History	Sarf
Introduction to Translation Studies	Translation Application II
Classical Text Readings I	Classical Text Readings II
Media Text Readings I	Media Text Readings II
2nd Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	2nd Year 2nd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
Arabic Grammar III	Arabic Grammar IV
English III	English IV
Texts from Contemporary Arabic Literature I	Arab World
Dictionaries	Texts from Contemporary Arabic Literature II
Arabic Conversation III	Arabic Conversation IV
Composition I	Composition II
Translation Application II	Translation Application III
Turkish Text Readings I	Turkish Text Readings II
Listening and Translation I	Listening and Translation II

3 <sup>rd</sup> Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year 2nd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
Rhetoric I	Rhetoric II
Arabic Conversation V	Arabic Conversation VI
English V	English VI
Composition III	Composition IV
Arabic Dialects With Examples I	Arabic Dialects With Examples II
Consecutive Translation I	Stenography
Simultaneous Translation I	Simultaneous Translation II
Spoken Translation from Text	Consecutive Translation II

## Appendix II:

IUE programme for the Psychology degree

1 <sup>st</sup> Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	1 <sup>st</sup> Year 2nd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
English I	English III
Introduction to Psychology I	Introduction to Psychology II
Academic Writing	Child Psychology
Introduction to Sociology	Physiological Psychology
History of World Civilizations	Introduction to Philosophy

2nd Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	2nd Year 2nd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
English III	English IV
Adolescence Psychology	Adult Psychology
Social Psychology	Quantitative Research Methods
Learning Psychology	Theories of Personhood
Statistics	Cognitive Psychology
Human Relations and Communication	Stress and Combatting Stress
Psychology of Religion	Psychopathology

3rd Year 1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	3rd Year 3rd Semester
Name of Course	Name of Course
English V	English VI
Qualitative Research Methods	Professional Ethics in Psychology
Psychological Tests	Family Consultancy
Individual Interview Methods	Group Interview Methods
Clinical Psychology	Cultural Psychology
Psychopathology II	Field Application
Field Application	Interview Techniques Application